

A Most Savage Art: Hegemony, Ideology, and Human Sacrifice

Research Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation  
“*with Research Distinction in Religious Studies*” in the undergraduate colleges of  
The Ohio State University

By  
Dillon Andrew Sampson

May 2017

Project Advisor: Professor Hugh Urban, Department of Comparative Studies

Thesis Committee:

Hugh Urban, Department of Comparative Studies

Sarah Iles Johnston, Department of Classics and Department of Comparative Studies

## I. Introduction

The art of sacrifice has long existed as a grotesque fantasy within the minds of 20<sup>th</sup> -21<sup>st</sup>-century peoples, a begotten relic of a more savage age of humanity. Sacrifice has popularly been reduced to an irrational, immoral action of “pagans,” and since been eradicated by the light of Christianity. However, as most scholars know, this is certainly not the case, in fact, the practice of sacrifice reflects a cunning and beguilement that is reflected in the modern nation state. I will henceforth, in the course of this essay, illuminate the more sinister motivations behind the art of sacrifice by reference to three *exempli gratia*, whose data reflect what Jonathan Z Smith would understand as a “fundamental” issue in religion.<sup>1</sup> That is the issue surrounding hegemony and ideology, to which religion has served as a faithful companion in their foxtrot through history. Yet, before I might properly assert my thesis, it is necessary to indulge in a brief sketch of the comparative model I am engaging with, the theory of sacrifice that shall serve as my template in this analysis, and a brief examination of the religious traditions themselves.

The history of comparison has been a long and troubled one, however, indeed, it is through comparison and the instructive knowledge, as Bruce Lincoln notes, that is rendered when a consideration of data is set against each other that all knowledge is derived.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the process of comparison is one that has yielded the worst forms of errors, mistakes, and misconstructions.<sup>3</sup> These follies are both a result of innocent misrecognition and self-interested bowdlerizing of the data, as one must keep in mind, the scholar is always a self-interested actor.<sup>4</sup> This is evident in their definitions, selections to serve as their *exempli gratia*,

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Z Smith, *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 121.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

and their ultimate conclusions.<sup>5</sup> Hitherto, the model of comparison as advanced in the history self-interested intellectuals, that can understand as a “strong” comparison, has been one focused on universal patterns.<sup>6</sup> Such models, whatever they may be, have consistently proved fruitless to render what one may call accurate knowledge. Thus, I will be following a “weaker” model of comparison, advocated by Bruce Lincoln, that

- (a) focus on a small number of comparanda... (b) are equally attentive to relations of similarity and difference; (c) grant equal dignity and intelligence to all parties considered; and (d) are attentive to the social, historical, and political contexts.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, this comparison should allow a reflection among the comparanda, a reflection that highlights junctures of tension within the religious traditions.<sup>8</sup> It is these “points of tension” that I believe will yield the most valuable data, to which I will moreover focus on particular historical moments in which such tensions were exacerbated. Thus, by focusing on times of “emergency” within the particular religious traditions, the ideology of religious coding in sacrifice is on grotesque display.

Understanding, as we do, the nature of this comparative endeavor, I feel that naturally, it is also necessary to capitulate a theory of sacrifice that shall be serving me in this thesis.

Theories of sacrifice are quite vast and varied, to say the least, and each, for the most part, have areas of strength in analyzing the practice. Before I render the theory that I believe shall be most useful going forward, it will be helpful to expiate a brief summation of the theories that have formed the field. One of which, if not highly problematic, is the theory of Rene Girard, who has posited a theory revolving around the concept of “mimetic desire.”<sup>9</sup> This mimetic desire refers to

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Carter, *Understanding Religious Sacrifice* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 240.

a basic primal craving of a tangible object or intangible trait that another has within a group, a fervent desire that fosters a “monstrous double” of admiration and rejection.<sup>10</sup> This desire, of course, leads to the violent acquisition of said tangibles or intangibles by one member of the group from the other, to which the roles then become reversed as a desire for vengeance is created, and a feedback loop of violence is embedded.<sup>11</sup> To end the cycle of violence created by mimetic desire, Girard posits that societies developed sacrifice as a way to create a surrogate victim, upon whom the interior violence of the group can be transferred and subsequently expelled (i.e., killed).<sup>12</sup> However, as logical as this wide-sweeping theory might appear to be, it relies far too much on a lack of judicial institution as a motivating cause, an inherent primitivity—which would especially be true for human sacrifice in Girard’s view—that would exclude many sacrificial cultures. On the other hand, a far more popular theory of sacrifice is echoed by Valerio Valeri, Celia Schultz, and Kathryn McClymond, in which sacrifice, at its core, is a “consecrated” offering to a divine recipient in a place demarcated for ritual use. Certainly, while some such as McClymond might argue against an essential quality of sacrifice, it is apparent that the basic theme of a divine recipient is her model.<sup>13</sup> However, I find this core thesis to be problematic as well, as it places far too much emphasis on an idea of communication with the divine and leaves a multitude of practices excluded. To preempt criticism of this sort, scholars such as Celia Schultz have taken to the term “ritual murder” to define a category of practices that are lacking an explicitly divine recipient.<sup>14</sup> This category of ritual murder confines a scholar to the vocabulary of those he studies, to constrain himself to the logic of the subjects

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 240-241.

<sup>13</sup> Celia Schultz, “The Romans and Ritual Murder,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, No.2 (2010): 518.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 518.

and what they consider and do not consider sacrifice. Notwithstanding, the need of the scholar to take his subject seriously, he threatens his position as a scholar to allow the religious to define the categories of which their practices are to be understood.<sup>15</sup> Instead, we must remain cognizant that the very categories of the religious themselves speak to an ideological narrative, a narrative that the scholar is at risk of reproducing if he fails to define the religious. Thus, the theory I turn to is one posited by Bruce Lincoln in his work *Death, War, and Sacrifice*, in which he states:

I would argue that sacrifice is most fundamentally a logic, language, and practice of transformative negation, in which one entity—a plant or animal, a bodily part, some portion of the person’s life, energy, property, or even life itself—is given up for the benefit of some other species, group, god, or principle that is understood to be “higher” or more deserving in one fashion or another.<sup>16</sup>

This theory of sacrifice allows for a depth of analytical analysis that is simply not available in other theories of sacrifice. It is a theory that can properly appreciate the socio-cultural particularities of sacrifice, while also critiquing the power structures of the religious traditions. Though, be that as it may, I wish to build upon this theory with an addition to accommodate the nature of ideological dissemination. Lincoln hints at this when he points out that practice of sacrifice serves to benefit those who have the power and privilege to define themselves as “higher,” than those that are sacrificed.<sup>17</sup> Thus, I add to this by saying that religion, as a part of the greater cultural front of society and ergo an apparatus of hegemony, in the practice of sacrifice disseminates a most forceful ideology (i.e., the false consciousness) in the service of manufacturing and coercing consent to the ruling hegemony.

---

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.), 204.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

It would be of service now to offer a brief summation of the religious traditions that shall be used in the service of comparison. First and foremost, I shall be using the ever popular Aztecs of Mesoamerica and their sacrifices at the Templo Mayor. The process in which I approach these religious traditions shall be such that I will contextualize sacrifice in their religious worldview, provide a particular example of their sacrifice, and conclude with an analysis. The Aztecs provide a rich history of sacrifice, but I shall focus on an account provided by Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a Spanish conquistador, as my exemplar of the practice. In addition to the account of the conquistador, I shall also make use of the *Florentine Codex*, an ethnography of Aztec culture provided by Bernardino de Sahagun. With these primary accounts, I would also take advantage of the scholarship of David Carrasco, whose works such as *City of Sacrifice* and *Religions of Mesoamerica* are invaluable. Complimenting the Aztecs shall be the human sacrifices performed by the Romans, a culture that has been held by the contemporary world as an ideal and free from “savagery.” Though, as we shall see, the ideals championed by the contemporary world, and the Romans themselves, stand in stark contrast to historical realities. Using the account of Livy’s *History of Rome*, I shall examine a sacrifice performed roughly in the year 216 BCE, following the defeat at the Battle of Cannae, in which a pair of Gauls and Greeks were entombed. Together with Livy’s account will be the scholarship of Celia Schultz and her article “The Romans and Ritual Murder,” and, likewise, Alison Futrell’s work *Blood in the Arena*. Lastly, I shall pursue what could be a controversial example by analyzing the Navajo Kinaalda, a puberty rite of young Native girls. I do this firstly to stretch the limits of what we conventionally understand as human sacrifice in religion, but also to illustrate the insidious nature of sacrifice as a vehicle of ideological dissemination in a more grounded context. I shall be relying on an ethnography provided by Charlotte Johnson Frisbie titled *Kinaalda*, with the addition of Bruce Lincoln’s

*Emerging from the Chrysalis*. These are the *exemple gratia* by which I hope to illustrate a fundamental issue within the phenomenon of religion.

Consequently, now that we have defined the parameters of our comparative endeavor, elucidated a theory of sacrifice for analysis, and offered a concise summation of our data, I wish, at the risk of in some ways repeating myself, to put forth my central claim. That is, the practice of sacrifice as a transformative negation acts to disseminate an ideology, an ideology that coerces consent to a particular hegemony. Moreover, as I will illustrate, the impetus behind the forceful nature of sacrifice is a due result of structural tensions in a particular culture's hierarchy of power. These tensions, especially when they are exacerbated, threaten hegemony of the ruling class, which is ergo reinforced, reproduced, and imposed in the sacrificial act.

## **II. Aztecs and the Temple of Doom**

At the time of the arrival of Cortez in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Aztecs presided over one of the largest empires in the Americas. It is an empire centered around the grand city of Tenochtitlan, which held dominion over a vast swath of tributary states. At the heart of Aztec religion is the practice of sacrifice, a practice that not only sustained the religious needs of the people but provided ideological justification for its imperialism. Thus, I will first begin by drawing a sketch of the religious worldview of the Aztecs, paying particular attention to their premier mythic figures which set the foundation for sacrificial practice. Henceforth, I will then situate the practice of sacrifice in the Aztec life, from which we can begin to understand its ideological value. After this is done, I will then turn to the account of Bernal Diaz del Castillo, which provides for a case example of sacrifice but one that is also exacerbated by an existential crisis. With that done, we can begin to make sense of the subtle ideological goals of the bloody practice.

As previously mentioned, the foundation of Aztec sacrifice is found in two of their mythic figures, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli.<sup>18</sup> I will first focus upon the former; the *hombre dios* Topiltzin. This *hombre dios* was a primordial Toltec mythic figure that prefigured as the exemplary priest-king, one whose model of conduct was to be followed by all that came after him.<sup>19</sup> The whole of Topiltzin's life is, in fact, a model of sacrifice, as Carrasco notes:

raised by his grandparents and underwent seven years of rigorous ritual, living for a time as a mountain ascetic. He practiced autosacrifice, the bleeding of oneself through insertion of spines or other ritual implements into parts of one's body. These techniques were at once offerings to the gods and "openings" in the human body designed to enhance direct communication with deities.<sup>20</sup>

While this is not what we would expect as a conventional notion of sacrifice in Aztec religion, it is of vital importance to ground the life of the mythic figure in practice of transformative negation. This grounding allows for an organic progression to the warrior-king archetype, one that would figure prominently. Which, indeed, as Topiltzin grew he graduated into the class of warrior/sacrificer, truly embodying the nature of his birth. By that I mean, as the figure of Topiltzin drifted away from the religious ascetic to that of the sacrificer, his story becomes one grounded in war.<sup>21</sup> Many primary sources, such as the *Historia de Los Mexicanos por sus pinturas*, make a point of connecting Topiltzin, and the Chichimec people (i.e., the Aztecs), to a warrior heritage. Indeed, the aforementioned source, as noted by Carrasco, states that "the gods created the Chichimec people in order to gain sacrificial blood through human warfare and the ritual sacrifice of captive warriors."<sup>22</sup> Within this cosmic order Topiltzin certainly embodied this

---

<sup>18</sup> David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1998), 58.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.



character and, as mentioned in the *Leyenda de los soles*, after burying his father he is attacked by warriors led by one Apanetcatl, Topiltzin, according to Carrasco, then

rose up, striking full in the face, sent him tumbling down, and he fell to the base of the mountain. Next he seized Zolton and Cuilton...he put them to death, he spread them with chili and slashed their flesh and set out to make conquests.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Topiltzin solidifies his warrior/sacrificer aspect, a figure whose conduct of voraciously attacking the “enemy” and sacrificing him on mountain shrines becomes an exemplary model.<sup>24</sup> Already we can dissect a militaristic ideology behind this myth, one in which the “nature” of the ideal priest-king is connected to not only violence per se, but to sacrifice. One in which sacrifice is understood to be the pinnacle of superiority.

The figure of Topiltzin is complimented, and some would say overshadowed, by the foundational figure of Aztec reality, the god Huitzilopochtli. This seminal figure of Aztec mythology is the god responsible for the founding of the city, behind the establishment of the Templo Mayor—upon which his shrine sat.<sup>25</sup> Huitzilopochtli was the primordial sacrificer, from which all sacrifices that were to come were modeled. While Topiltzin provided a model for the priest-king to follow, it is Huitzilopochtli that provides the ideological legitimacy for the act. The myth of the god starts when his mother Coatlicue was sweeping the temple on the serpent mountain Coatepec, a ball of plumage “descended” upon her and she placed it in her bosom. Later it was known that this had made her pregnant, the pregnancy angered her other children who were incited by their warrior sister Coyolxauhqui to attack her.<sup>26</sup> As they stormed the mount Coatlicue was frightened, but she soon heard a voice from her womb saying “Have no fear, I

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 75.

know what I must do.”<sup>27</sup> As the small army reached the mountaintop, the God Huitzilopochtli sprang from the womb in full battle regalia and decapitated Coyolxauhqui. The original text of the *Florentine Codex* reads that “her body went falling below, and it went crashing to pieces in various places, her arms, legs, body kept falling.”<sup>28</sup> He then preceded to chase the other four hundred that had followed Coyolxauhqui off the temple “like rabbits” and “destroyed them” and “annihilated them.”<sup>29</sup> This myth serves to reinforce the “nature” of the Chichimec people as one born in violence and death.

Understanding these mythic figures of the Aztecs, we can begin to appreciate the importance of violence and sacrifice in Aztec religious life. These myths disseminate a militaristic ideology, one in which the domination of the other is at the core of their identity. This was explicit in Aztec imperialism, that they would routinely take the people of conquered tribes yearly and make sacrifices of them.<sup>30</sup> However, these sacrifices were not made for Aztecs alone, as they would routinely force the leaders of the tribes, from which they drew their victims, into attendance.<sup>31</sup> The pomp of the sacrifice was quite celebratory for the Aztecs, as Carrasco notes of the tributes:

These victims were ritually bathed, carefully costumed, taught to dance special dances, and either fattened or slimmed down during the preparation period. They were elaborately dressed to impersonate specific deities to whom they were sacrificed... the ceremony peaked when splendidly attired captors and captives sang and danced in procession to the various temples where they were escorted (sometimes unwillingly) up the stairways to the sacrificial stone.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>30</sup> David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire* (Boulder: The University Press of Colorado, 2000), 186.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>32</sup> David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 83.

However, this festive extravaganza obfuscated the sinister power-play of the Aztec elite, one in which

The ritual extravaganza was carried out with maximum theatrical tension, paraphernalia and terror in order to amaze and intimidate the visiting dignitaries who returned to their kingdoms trembling with fear and convinced that co-operation and not rebellion was the best response to Aztec imperialism.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, in this violent and bloody act, very explicit ideological messages are encoded and disseminated to those in attendance. For the Aztec citizen, this was an ideology of superiority, their right of domination of the conquered, one in which the conquered took upon the role of Huitzilopochtli's evil brother and sisters, to which the Aztecs possess the inherent right to vanquish them. This ideology need not forcefully coerce the Aztec citizenry but induce a euphoria of excellence, by which a false consciousness and consent to the ruling hegemony are built. On the other hand, there is disseminated a message of inferiority or a message of domination to the conquered dignitaries. To be forced in attendance to a rite in which those of your own tribe are brutalized is psychologically devastating, this is ideological coercion *par excellence*. However, this is the typical function of sacrifice in Aztec religion, from which I might now turn to an atypical example. One where we might see the tensions of Aztec hegemony in their imperial project threatened.

The account of sacrifice I now turn to is provided for us by David Carrasco; it is an account of the conquistador Bernal Diaz del Castillo during the Battle of Tenochtitlan. The account is as follows, Castillo states:

there was sounded the dismal drum of the Huichilobos and many other shells and horns and things like trumpets and the sound of them all was terrifying, and we all looked toward the lofty temple where they were being sounded, and saw that our comrades

---

<sup>33</sup> David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 186.

whom they had captured when they had defeated Cortes were being carried by force up the steps and they were taking them to be sacrificed. When they got them up to a small square in front of the oratory, where their accursed idols are kept, we saw them place plumes on the heads of many of them and with things like fans in their hands they forced them to dance before the Huichilobos and after they had danced they immediately placed them on their backs on some rather narrow stones which had been prepared as places of sacrifice, and with some knives they sawed open their chests and drew out their palpitating hearts and offered them to the idols that were there, and they kicked the bodies down the steps, and the Indian butchers who were waiting below cut off the arms and feet and flayed the skin of their faces, and prepared it afterwards like glove leather with the beards on, and kept those for festivals when they celebrated drunken orgies and they flesh they ate in chilimole.<sup>34</sup>

Putting aside the flair of this conquistador account, regarding “orgies” and the like, we are confronted with an exceptionally interesting example of Aztec sacrifice. One that we can surmise as hurried, inglamorous, and lacking the obvious pomp that would have been accorded such an occasion. This is a sacrifice performed out of fear; that is to say, not necessarily a fear found in the common people but a fear located in the Aztec hegemony. The cornerstone of Aztec hegemony was their superiority, something continually renewed in their sacrifices, but during the invasion/rebellion headed by Cortez, the hegemony is confronted with a genuinely counterhegemonic force. One that reflects the precarious societal tensions in Aztec society; by which I mean over the course of the empire’s history it had decimated the agricultural producers (i.e., conquered tribes) in the pursuit of continually reproducing their hegemony.<sup>35</sup> By the time Cortez had arrived, the growth necessary to support the hegemony of the Aztec elite had stymied.<sup>36</sup> It was buckling under the own weight of its ideology, and this crumbling of the state, combined with the counterhegemonic threat of Cortez, had left the Aztec elite in a desperate position. Thus, the sacrifice of the conquistadors was, what could be called, the last gasp of an

---

<sup>34</sup> David Carrasco, *The Great Temple of Tenochitlan* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987), 124.

<sup>35</sup> Alison Futrell, *Blood in Arena* (Austin: The University of Texas Press), 173.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

Empire, a violent riposte lacking in the self-indulgent glamor. The Aztec elite, in the moment of temporary victory, had reasserted their superiority to the populous. The foreign threat had been made to dance, to which they were then subsequently killed like every other conquered tribe. It was a forceful show of power that reflected the core of Aztec ideology.

In sum, we can now appreciate the far-ranging implications that sacrifice can have for a culture, especially one in which it exists a lynchpin for their hegemony. Sacrifice and the ideology it disseminated was a dual-edged blade for the Aztecs, one in which allowed them to seize and maintain an impressive degree of control, yet, on the other hand, proved to be their ruin. The ideology of superiority at the heart of Aztec sacrifice had left the culture unable to integrate conquered peoples; they were little more than tributes for which the Aztec elite had used to reproduce their power. However, this ideology had run the empire bankrupt of an efficient infrastructure, and the failure of the hegemony to adapt it resulted in catastrophic failure.

### **III. Reluctant Romans**

Human sacrifice was, in no uncertain terms, very much part of the Roman religion, in spite of a concentrated effort that would advocate the contrary.<sup>37</sup> That being said, there is much disagreement among scholars concerning the extent to which the Romans practiced sacrifice, and what can and cannot be constituted as “sacrifice.” Thus, for this case study, I will explore the extent to which Romans made human sacrifices, what they considered to be a sacrifice, and the religious logic of sacrifice. From this point, I will then explore the account provided by Livy detailing a sacrifice performed shortly after the defeat at Cannae to Hannibal.

---

<sup>37</sup> Celia Schultz, “The Romans and Ritual Murder,” 535.

The first point of departure in the study of the Romans is understanding their own attitudes toward sacrifice, and how they understood their own practices in relation. First and foremost, it goes without say that, on the surface, the Romans loathed sacrifice. As Celia Schultz notes, Romans often invoked sacrifice to highlight the “un-Romaness” of foreign peoples.<sup>38</sup> Such accusations that would be later emulated by colonial powers were deft ideological moves that cast the accused as little more than savage barbarians, to which they were then juxtaposed against the “enlightened” Roman.<sup>39</sup> In much the same light as their Aztec counterparts, the Roman hegemony was heavily interested in created a consent to their superiority. The Romans would wield this ideological cudgel quite heavy handily against both the Gauls and particularly the Carthaginians.<sup>40</sup> However, the onus of sacrifice was not only placed in polemics against their neighbors but often at fellow Romans as well. Livy, having a knack for slipping in such accusations, is a testament, if nothing else, of how Romans would retroactively delegitimize movements of the past. This is particularly the case for the Bacchic cult and the Catilinarian conspiracy, both of whom carried rumors of blood rite sacrifices (i.e., Cataline) or legitimate human sacrifices (i.e., Bacchic Cult).<sup>41</sup> Now, while rumors might be just rumors, it is nevertheless indicative of the extreme distaste Romans had for sacrifice, that carrying the rumor of the act could be a potent delegitim�er. Lastly, if only to belabor the point, the practice of sacrifice, and its resultant legitimacy, is found at the heart of Roman identity, That is to say; one of the pinnacle myths of the Republic is its remove of the last tyrannical king, a removal that

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 520.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 520.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 523.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 524

found just cause in the king's practice of sacrifice.<sup>42</sup> Yet, this proud history against barbarity stands quite awkwardly against Roman realities.

While the Romans had proudly stood against the savageness of the practice, they were all too often engaging in it. To be sure, the following practice I shall be using to illustrate that point was not thought to be sacrifice, but, understanding the theory as I originally set forth, it can not be interpreted in any other way. The prime example of these practices is the drowning of hermaphrodites, entities that proved to be a catch-22 of sorts for the Roman hegemony. The hermaphrodite was understood to be a prodigy; that is, according to Schultz, an “event or being that violates the natural order, like a bleeding statue or talking cow.”<sup>43</sup> The presence of a prodigy was indicative of a rupture in the *pax deorum*, which is to say that the delicate relationship that has been fostered with the gods had been disturbed.<sup>44</sup> Such prodigies were quickly rectified, or, in the case of hermaphrodites, they were drowned in a box at sea. This killing of the hermaphrodites represents a precarious tension in the Roman society, which is to say, they blur the line of what can be called human sacrifice. According to our working theory of sacrifice, these deaths surely were exemplary models, but the Romans did everything they could to eschew themselves of an association with the practice. The texts do not refer to the hermaphrodite as a *victima*, nor do they make use of a sacrificial vocabulary to describe the act (i.e., *sacrificare*), only *necare* (to kill).<sup>45</sup> Prodigies were dangerous counterhegemonic forces, ones that threatened the ideology of Roman supremacy (i.e., *Pax Deorum*). They must be killed, but the Romans likewise took care to remove themselves from a barbarous association with the

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 525.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 529.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 529.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 530.

practice that they themselves used as evidence of their “enlightened” nature. Certainly, we can see how the ideology of the Roman hegemony concerning sacrifice was used to further their imperial ambitions; it was a hegemony, likewise, supported by *pax deorum*. To which any failings encountered by the state was only evidence of a relationship that needed mending by rectifying the prodigies, an action in which—at least regarding the Hermaphrodites—the Romans were forced to engage in sacrifice, but eschewed a specific connection to the practice. Ultimately, the deaths of the hermaphrodite children were for the express purpose reproducing Roman hegemony; the sacrifices protected an ideology that connected the conquests of the state with the divine will of the gods.

Understanding the Roman view of human sacrifice, their contradictory engagement with the practice, and the logic of *pax deorum* that motivated it, we can now turn to a set of human sacrifices that even the Romans themselves acknowledged as such. I am, of course, referring to a set of sacrifices carried out in the aftermath of the disaster at Cannae, a devastating battle that saw some sixty-thousand Roman men slaughter by the Carthaginian Hannibal.<sup>46</sup> This was, with little doubt, the most disastrous defeat in Roman history at that time, one in which the very hegemony upon which Roman society had built was shaken. Hannibal was at the gates, and the public, predictably, had gone into a frenzy.<sup>47</sup> Conspicuously complimenting this disaster was an uptick in prodigies, two Vestal virgins failing to remain chaste, and a general public degeneracy. The Roman elite moved to gain control of this situation swiftly, rectifying the prodigies and entombing the unchaste Vestal virgin (the other had committed suicide) as was their custom—taking heed up to this point again to describe their actions without the language of sacrifice.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Alison Futrell, *Blood in Arena*, 199.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>48</sup> Celia Schultz, “The Romans and Ritual Murder,” 533.



However, this would not prove enough, the disaster of Cannae was simply too great, any of semblance of *pax deorum* had been lost—which, of course, could not be tolerated if hegemony was to remain. Thus, in the account of Livy, translated by Celia Schultz, the Romans make an explicit sacrifice, he states:

In addition to such great disasters, the people were terrified both by the other prodigies and because in this year two Vestals, Opimia and Floronia, were discovered to have had illicit affairs. One had been killed at the Colline Gate, under the earth as is the custom and the other took her own life... Since this horrible event which occurred in the midst of so many terrible things, as is wont to happen, was turned into a prodigy, the decemviri were ordered to consult the Books. Q. Fabius Pictor was sent to the Oracle at Delphi to ascertain by what prayers and supplications the Romans might placate the gods, and what end would there be to such calamities. Meanwhile, from the Sibylline Books, some unusual *sacrifices* were ordered, among which was one where a Gallic man and woman and a Greek man and woman were sent down alive into an underground room walled with rock, a place that had already been tainted before by human victims—hardly a Roman rite.<sup>49</sup>

Now, this account is quite valuable, but also somewhat problematic. While we know, it was hosted in the Forum Boarium; we do not know who was in attendance. However, in lieu of this information, and given the fact that this was a heavily commercial area, I believe it is satisfactory to assume that it was not an esoteric ritual but one done in full view of the public. Indeed, if that was the manner in which it was carried out, the sacrifice is a naked rendering of the Roman's desperation. Even given the fact the Livy retroactively attempts to remove the onus of the sacrifice from the Romans, this was an act similar in nature to the sacrifice of the conquistadors performed by the Aztecs.<sup>50</sup> It was the restitution of the *pax deorum* ideology; it “reaffirmed” the intrinsically *sui generis* relationship that the Romans had with the gods and would assure the public of the inevitable victory. Under the guise of this restitution, the Romans

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 533.

<sup>50</sup> Alison Futrell, *Blood in Arena*, 203.

were now freed to take extraordinary measures for the defense of the city, such as, for example, the recommissioning of arms and armor from the spoils that decorated the temples and the recruitment of slaves.<sup>51</sup> In sum, the sacrifice was little more than a public spectacle, one in which *pax deorum* is perceived to be restored, the superiority of the state relegitimized to the populace, and the elite gain a *carte blanche* justification to do what is necessary to ensure the survival of the state and their power.

Thus, the Romans were in many ways had quite an expertise in the managing of their ideology. Such that, they effectively wielded the onus of sacrifice as a dehumanizer of their rivals, indicative of their superiority, and affirmed their unique relationship to the gods. Moreover, they skillfully eschewed the language of sacrifice in the killing of those counterhegemonic forces that were popularly understood to be indicative of a rupture in their relationship with the gods (i.e., Hermaphrodites, Unchaste Vestals, etc.). Yet, in the face of an existential counterhegemonic force, the Romans utilized human sacrifice to maintain their hegemony and provide ideological justification of measures necessary to secure their survival. Much unlike their Aztec counterparts, this sacrifice proved to be a deft move on the part of the Roman elite and can be only understood as a categorical success.

#### **IV. Kinaalda: The Puberty of Hegemony**

With this particular case study, I intend to broach a more controversial example of what I would posit as a sacrifice. The case I wish to examine is that of the Kinaalda, a Navajo puberty rite. Certainly, this pushes the boundaries of what is conventionally thought of as a sacrifice, but keeping in mind the theory of Lincoln, I wish to demonstrate that this is fundamentally a

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 199.

sacrifice of the abstract girl in favor of the creation of the model “woman.” A model constructed by the hegemony of a patriarchal elite within the tribe. Thus, I will first cover the basics of the ritual, from which I will then proceed to analyze their ideological meanings.

The ritual of the Kinaalda is one that lasts for approximately four nights and five days, during which the intiand actively seeks to replicate the role of the Changing Woman.<sup>52</sup> The Changing Woman is the primordial mythic figure who inaugurated the ritual; she is invoked consistently over the course of the ritual in the form of song.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the myth of the Changing Woman provides the “logic” for many of the practices performed in the ritual, for instance, every day the intiand is required to run “towards the sun,” which is deduced from the relationship that the Changing woman is said to have had with the being.<sup>54</sup> Thus, it should be kept in mind, the whole of this ritual is based on replicating in some form the life of the “ideal” woman.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, there are two particular practices I want to make mention of before I analyze the ideological goals of this ritual.

The first practice of particular interest is the molding that the intiand is required to undertake as the ritual begins its climax. Prior to the molding the intiand is decorated and ornamented in the image of the Changing Woman, indicative of the role in which she is expected to take.<sup>56</sup> Following her ornamentation, she begins her “molding,” which consists of two older women of the tribe messaging her skin deeply, this is believed to make her skin supple and renewed.<sup>57</sup> This action of molding the skin of the intiand is undertaken with regularity after she

---

<sup>52</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Emerging From The Chrysalis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 18.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

has been ornamented in the image of the Changing Woman. These efforts allow her to be “reformed” by the forces around her, she is susceptible to “change” at this juncture.<sup>58</sup> In many ways, this is where her girlhood is clearly demarcated to end, while her womanhood begins its construction.

The other practice that is of use to recognize marks the end of the ritual, the climax of five days work, and the clear delineation of the intiand’s “womanhood.” This is the making and distribution of a corn cake, one that is representative of the labor found ideal in “womanhood.” On the fourth day of the ritual, various men dig a circular pit, in which they construct a fire. This fire is allowed to simmer out throughout the day, from which point the ashes and anything else undesirable is scraped out.<sup>59</sup> Up to this point, over the course of the four days, the intiand has slowly been making cornmeal, an arduous and physically taxing task given the amount she is expected to make, which on the fourth day she mixes into a batter which is thusly poured into the pit.<sup>60</sup> A fire is then constructed over it and left to burn over the night. While the cake is baked the intiand begins the final ceremony in the family hogan, a ceremony of song that recounts the tales of the Changing Woman.<sup>61</sup> Come morning, the intiand, and the other ritual participants, bless themselves with corn pollen and proceed to the pit where the cake has been now baked.<sup>62</sup> As the cake is removed from the pit, the intiand is careful to distribute the cake to all in attendance but is strictly forbidden from consuming any of it herself.<sup>63</sup> The cake is a gift of her labor, given out

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 24.

generously to all within her community to take part in, while she herself eats none of it because it was not made with such intent.

I find this to be a particularly disturbing sacrifice, partly because it is much more grounded in the daily life of a human being than the imperial machinations we have seen to this point. The problematic element of this ritual begins with the “molding” exercise which epitomizes the social pressure of society; she is being reformed anew but to what purpose?<sup>64</sup> We are told that this is to create a woman, but what kind of women, and, for that matter, what even is a “woman”? We must acknowledge that “womanhood” is not an inherent trait, but one constructed by self-interested contingent cultural actors. Womanhood is a construction of the hegemony, a construction that serves its purposes and ideals. They seek to shape the admirable form of a woman; this is a form prefigured upon that of the Changing Woman. Thus, her ornamentation and “molding,” is little than coercive social pressure flexed upon impressionable youth.<sup>65</sup> However, I believe the practice of making and distributing the corn cake is even more indicative of the ideological goal present in the rite. Before that, however, let me recapitulate the voice of a Kinaalda girl, an account given to us by Charlotte Frisbie and used in a likewise manner by Bruce Lincoln. The girl, in response to being asked about the ritual, states:

Well, if you're cheerful four days [the length of the ceremony] maybe you get in the habit of it, doing it all your life. And if you put the food before the people all the time and try to help around the house, you'll be willing to do those things for the people wherever you go... You know, when you grow up, you got to learn sometime. You get most of those things out of those four days. As a woman. I mean most of the things you got to do as a mother.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 113.

This Navajo girl is an exemplary model of a victim of hegemony, one who, through the ritual of sacrifice, has killed her girlhood while simultaneously internalizing the ideology of “womanhood.” She has given up an aspect of herself for an ideological principle she understands as higher than herself. Furthermore, this statement likewise highlights the ideological import of the corn cake rite, one in which the woman is required to greatly labor, to make a significant amount of food for her community, and to freely give it out while expecting nothing in return.<sup>67</sup> She is demonstrating an ideology of womanhood, in which the woman acts as an industrious bee, putting forth her labor at the disposal of her husband and tribe.<sup>68</sup> It is a woman ready to take on the roles inherent to her gender, roles that are portrayed as natural extensions of one’s gender.<sup>69</sup> It obfuscates the social construction of gender, and thusly her role in society is made innately tied to the sex of her physical body. This is a sacrificial ritual that, while lacking in blood, showcases a brilliant manipulation of various rites that constructs a profound false consciousness, in which the girl no longer owns herself or her body. She has given that up to the hegemony.

To conclude, the puberty rite of the Kinaalda provides an excellent example in which the conventional notions of sacrifice are challenged. Scholars do themselves a disservice to rigidly hold human sacrifice as one in which the physical death of the victim is the dominant trait. The puberty rite of the Kinaalda does in some ways kill the girl; it is a quasi-violent coercion of her freedom, of her ability to define herself in society. It reproduces a hegemony in which one’s place is innately tied to their being, which I would conclude makes this the most dangerous form

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 113.

of sacrifice. It serves only to benefit the privileged members of a stratified society at the expense of the girl herself, which, to echo Bruce Lincoln, makes the practice intrinsically immoral.<sup>70</sup>

### **Conclusion: Sacrifice and Modernity**

Over the course of this paper, it has been my goal to illuminate sacrifice as a fundamentally artificial and self-interested process. As I stated at the beginning, sacrifice acts within the apparatus of religion to disseminate an ideology precipitated on coercing consent to hegemony. The forceful act of sacrifice, moreover, reflects a tension within the hegemonic culture. For the Aztecs, their hegemony was precipitated upon the ideology of superiority, one that needed constant sacrifice to reproduce. While on the other hand, sacrifice was a desperate gamble on the part of the Roman hegemony to reassert control in the face of the counterhegemonic force that was Hannibal. A force that the Roman hegemony could not adequately compensate, to which then sacrifice provide an answer. Lastly, within the Navajo puberty rite, the extreme coercion of the ritual points to a fear embedded in the system. This was the fear of individuality, especially of women, which the communal system could not tolerate. Women that could define themselves, and lead lives independent of what the tribe has conditioned her to live, is an intensely threatening prospect to the patriarchal hegemony. In sum, sacrifice acts as an ad hoc response to societal tension, to which these examples serve to reflect in each other. However, it is good to remember that this is not limited to Empires long dead, not a marginalized tribe in the southwest of the United States. Sacrifice is continually used in modernity to reproduce hegemony, to which I will close this with a brief example of sacrifice in Iraq.

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 109.

The sacrifice to which I refer to is of Saddam Hussein, the former dictator of Iraq. However, I am not referring to his execution, but to a popularly symbolic event that had proliferated popular media following the invasion. That is the toppling of Saddam's statue in downtown Baghdad on April 9<sup>th</sup> 2003. Much like the puberty rite, one might be baffled at how this would constitute a "sacrifice." To which I would argue, the idol of Saddam—who had cultivated a quasi-religious cult of personality—was given up to the ideals of freedom and democracy. Indeed, the toppling of the statue was seen to be a symbol of liberation, a symbol of the intrinsic good of western freedom.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, of course, we know that this event was little more than a carefully orchestrated lie. While the American military had been presented as silently watching over the event, they were, in fact, actively contributing to help topple the statue.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the crowd that cheered the symbolic death of Saddam and the new age of Western democracy were little more than a small group of expatriate Iraqis that were trusted to "perform."<sup>73</sup> In fact, the Firdos Square, in which the statue had been toppled in, was quite empty save the selected few.<sup>74</sup> American media carefully crafted the shots as if to present a powerful, popular movement. This was a sacrifice for the express purpose of denigrating the old regime, showing its weakness in the face of the new American hegemony. Furthermore, it was a sacrifice for the American people, in which the use of the Iraqi puppets passionately destroying our nemesis served to reinforce ideological support for the invasion, we were simply a benevolent force freeing a lesser people from bondage. In this way, the American people differed little from

---

<sup>71</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Religion, Empire, and Torture* ( Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 100.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 100



the Aztecs or the Romans; we had bought into a false consciousness and surrendered our consent to our hegemony.

In conclusion, I close with the reaffirmation that sacrifice is not an act of the past, but very much one of the present. It is the most potent vehicle by which the religious apparatus might disseminate ideology to the masses. In all cases, the underlying goal is the same, restore/solidify the power of the hegemonic elite and gather the consent, whether actively or passively, of the devoted citizenry to a further continuation of moral savagery.

### Selected Bibliography

- Carrasco, David. *Religions of Mesoamerica*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990.
- . *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*. Boulder: The University Press of Colorado, 2000.
- . *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan*. Berkley: The University of California Press, 1987.
- . *City of Sacrifice*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.
- Carter, Jeffrey. *Understanding Religious Sacrifice*. New York: Continuum, 2003.
- Frisbie, Charlotte. *Kinaalda*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967.
- Futrell, Alison. *Blood in the Arena*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997.
- Lincoln, Bruce. *Emerging From the Chrysalis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- . *Death, War, and Sacrifice*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- . *Religion, Empire, and Torture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- . *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Schultz, Celia. "The Romans and Ritual Murder" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, No.2. 2010.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.

